

SUPPLE SPINE



This activity is amazing—and it's one of my favorites. The gentlest of motions can make a huge difference. In the beginning, participants are asked to spot a point on the ceiling, marking how far up they can see without pain. Then as their spine becomes suppler, they discover that they gradually can see farther and farther up, well beyond their original mark on the ceiling. Another plus for Supple Spine is that it uses only very gentle movements of the spine and pelvis, including flexion, extension, and rotation. The difference participants will experience with just a little more suppleness in their spine is unforgettable. I like it because participants experience the changes immediately and because it is so gentle. It's a lot of work to learn to teach, but it's worth it.

Benefits »

- ⦿ Ties function to flexibility.
- ⦿ Causes participants to notice how the spine is affected by both head and pelvic motion.
- ⦿ Uses gentle, relaxing spinal flexion, extension, and rotation to increase function.

Set It Up »

Supple Spine is a complex, multipart activity that requires practice to teach. The sequencing is important, and so is your choice of cues for guiding participants through the sensations. Allow yourself several practice sessions to get it down. Practice with friends and family. Everyone who tries it sees a difference, so chances are your friends will enjoy doing the activity, too.

How to Do It »

Tell participants they will be asked to do some gentle stretching of the back and neck. They should look and move only as far as they can without straining or causing pain.

Mark the Spots

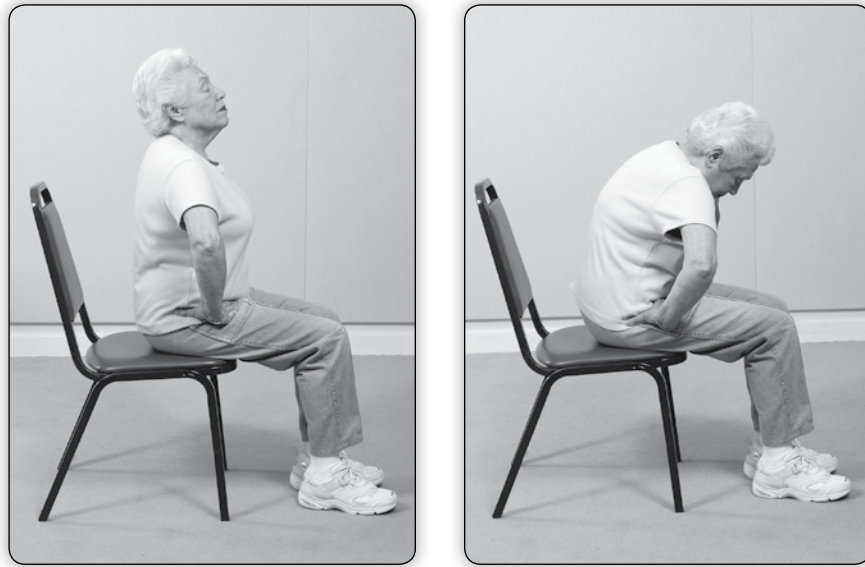
Use the following cues.

- ⦿ Sit up comfortably.
- ⦿ Look up at the ceiling, slowly and comfortably, without any strain or pain in the neck.
- ⦿ Look forward again.
- ⦿ Look up again. This time, notice exactly how far up the ceiling you can see without any pain or strain. Make a mental note of that spot for later.
- ⦿ Look left and make a mental marker there.
- ⦿ Look right and make a mental marker.

Rock the Pelvis Backward

Ask participants to sit tall on the edge of their chair with their feet flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart. Abs should be in, ribs lifted, shoulder blades back and down. The chin is parallel to the ground and head retracted a little. (This beginning position will be used in other exercises in this sequence as well.) Use the following cues.

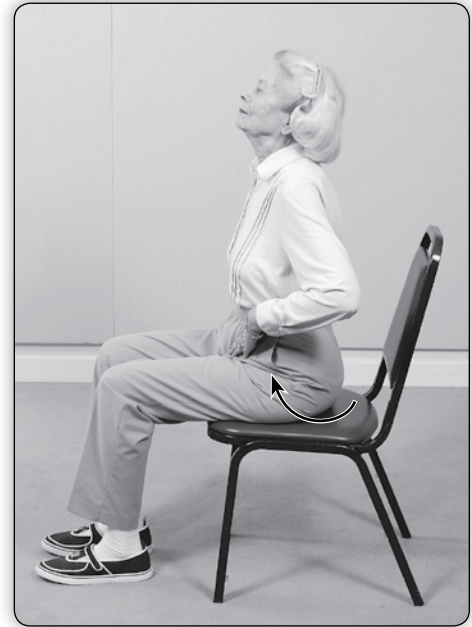
- ⦿ Place hands on the hips, thumbs to the back. (This hand placement will give participants a better feel for how to rock their pelvis.)
- ⦿ Take a deep breath to prepare. Exhale and slowly tilt the pelvis backward so the lower back rounds toward the chair. Your hands are on your hips; use them to help roll the hips back toward the chair.



- ⦿ Hold the position until you've exhaled completely.
- ⦿ Inhale and return to tall sitting. Relax.
- ⦿ Repeat the backward roll, but this time drop the chin to the chest and look down.
- ⦿ Hold the position.
 - Do you notice that the back rounds into a *C* shape?
 - Do other changes occur when the hips tilt back?
 - Do your shoulders roll forward and come closer together?
 - Does this posture make you a little shorter?
 - Do you feel your weight shift toward your tailbone?
 - Is your breathing restricted?
- ⦿ Return to tall sitting. Repeat if desired.

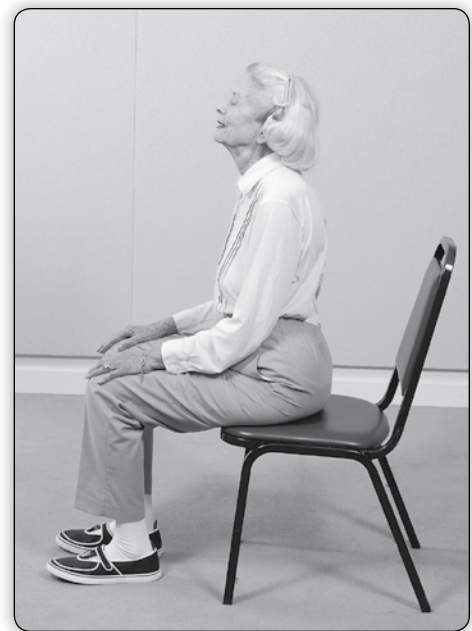
Rock the Pelvis Forward

- ⦿ Sit tall with hands on the hips, thumbs in back.
- ⦿ Blow out your breath.
- ⦿ Inhale and begin to lift your chest forward and up, pulling back the shoulders.
- ⦿ Use the thumbs on the hips to tilt the pelvis (hips) forward.
- ⦿ Exhale and return to starting position.
- ⦿ Inhale and repeat the activity, but this time look upward and lift your chin to the ceiling at the end of the movement.
- ⦿ As you tilt your hips forward, what do you notice?
 - Do you feel your lower back arch a little?
 - Do you feel a little taller?
 - Do you sense that your chest feels more open and your shoulders have moved backward?
 - Is breathing easier with your chest expanded?
 - Do you notice that your body weight moves forward toward your sitting bones?
- ⦿ Repeat. This time look up on the ceiling again, as far as you comfortably can.
- ⦿ Can you see farther than at the beginning?
- ⦿ The movement should be pain free and without strain. Remember to keep your abdomen, back, legs, and chest relaxed.



Combining Head, Eye, and Pelvic Movements

- ⦿ Sit tall on the edge of the chair, feet flat on floor, hands on the hips.
- ⦿ Cast your eyes downward to the floor. Keep the gaze down, no matter what.
- ⦿ Inhale and slowly lift the chin toward the ceiling. But keep the eyes looking down—don't lift them no matter what. Soon you'll be at a spot where you can lift the chin no higher without lifting the eyes.
- ⦿ Return to neutral posture and then repeat this gazing option one more time.
- ⦿ But this time allow the pelvis to tilt forward and the chest to rise. Try to keep the gaze downward until the very end.
 - Do you notice that your gaze limits the movement of your head?
 - Was there any tightness in your back?
 - Do you feel a stretch in your abs and across your chest when you rock the hips forward?



- ⊙ Return to neutral posture and then repeat this gazing option.
- ⊙ At the end, when you cannot lift your chin any higher because your eyes are limiting the head movement, let the gaze go. Look up, slowly and gently, all the way to the ceiling.
 - Can you see farther than the last time?
 - Was the movement easier when the eyes could move with the head and neck?
 - When your eyes, head, neck, and torso all contribute, is your range of motion clearly better?
 - Did the gentle stretching and rocking of the spine, hips, and neck make a difference in your overhead view?

Take It Further »

- ⊙ Start with the beginning position.
- ⊙ Exhale and rock the pelvis backward.
- ⊙ Inhale, rock the pelvis forward, and begin to lift and rotate the chest and trunk up and to the right by lifting the right shoulder.
- ⊙ Look up to the right. Lift the chin and right side of the face up and to the right.
- ⊙ Return to the beginning position.
- ⊙ Inhale and rock the pelvis forward. Lift and rotate the chest and trunk up and to the left by lifting the left shoulder.
- ⊙ Look up to the left. Lift the chin and left side of the face up and to the left.
- ⊙ Return to the beginning position.
- ⊙ Turn the head right, then left.
- ⊙ Compare how far you can see now compared with the beginning. Can you see farther than when you started? You bet!

Keep It Safe »

Stress that these movements are simple, gentle, undulating movements of the spine. Nothing should hurt.

Live It »

Even gentle stretching improves function.

Based on Zemach-Bersin, Zemach-Bersin, and Reese, 1990, Healthy spine. In *Relaxercise* (New York: Harper Collins).